

Emil slips the phone back in its holster on my harness, then looks around the three foot long wrecking bar and out the window. “How much trouble do you think they’re going to be?”

“They won’t stop us from meeting up with Alex.” A glance in the side mirror shows me the headlights from two jeeps. Enough light behind them for three more and erratic beams suggesting two, possibly three motorcycles. They came ready for terrain that would keep the jeeps from pursuing. Another bullet pings the pickup, but doesn’t get through the tow equipment in the back, and the armor I suspect Ralf added to the body.

“How far until our turn?”

“About a mile. The one-forty-nine is just as we enter Connelssville.”

I nod, then see the lights coming toward the road we are on from the left. “Buckle up.” I do the same as I accelerate, alternating from the mirror to the approaching vehicles. Three of them. Speed is difficult to estimate, but I expect they are doing the same thing I am. Trying to reach the intersection first.

Emil curses and puts a hand on the wrecking bar. I’ve reached the top speed the tow truck can achieve, and it won’t be enough. I expect Alex would have a way to out-manuever them. I rely on speed and brute force.

Their lights as they slide to a stop across the road shows the ditch on our right is still there. It might be flatter on the left because of the road, and there’s a building there, with an entrance from that road. All decisions end with us at a standstill and fighting. I make a left. The ditch is steeper than the tall grass led me to think. We bottom in and something breaks, but our momentum bounces us out and onto the gravel driveway. The steering wheel is locked in place and the tow truck turns as it slides to a stop with the passenger side away from the roads.

“Take as many down as you can,” I instruct, unbuckling, “but be ready for some of them to reach you. Do not hesitate to kill, Emil. I doubt they will bother capturing us. Don’t give them the chance to use their guns once they are down.”

I exit as the light by the bungalow’s door come on as I step out. The door opens and a man in a bathrobe steps out. “Do you—”

“Get in side and hide,” I order, taking out the Desert Eagle analog from the holster, and joining Emil. I wish I had time to practice with this weapon as I line up a shot on the lead jeep.

The detonation is close enough to be the same. The recoil is slightly stronger, implying more power, which means Ralf also modified the bullets. The jeep careens out of control, forcing the one next to it to slow down markedly. Emil fires at the stopped vehicles.

I fire again, and a spiderweb of cracks turns the windshield opaque. As they were already slowing, they keep doing that and the vehicles behind them do the same.

Emil changes magazine, but doesn’t fire again. Our enemies aren’t returning fire.

“Dad, why aren’t they firing back?”

The answer presents itself before I work it out when all the vehicle’s lights turn off, leaving only the tow truck’s headlights on.

“Should I reach in and turn ours off too?” Emil whispers.

“No. We need them to see them approach.” I push him down and put my back to the

truck, scanning the darkness. I can make out the other building and, from this angle, the two garage doors. They can move in the dark, go behind it and position shooters. Staying down, I can be out of the glow without them seeing and reach that position first. I ambush the shooters, take the position and weapons and use that to provide assistance to Emil, who... will be overwhelmed by numbers well before that.

I look at him, and he returns a quizzical expression. There is no uncertainty in his eyes. He has no doubt in our capability to survive, to win. Boxes fight my control and I almost tell him to run and lose himself in the darkness.

He won't obey.

He will interpret my desperation to see him safe as a lack of faith in his ability.

Motion out of the corner of my eye, at the edge of the light. The recoil turns my center-of-mass shot into a shoulder hit, but the soldier is on his back.

My indecision has stolen all options from us.

The box containing reproach knows better than to make itself noticed.

I angle myself to scan the darkness while keeping the garage in my peripheral vision. This time, when I see the motion, I account for the recoil and they are off their feet when they fully vanish in the darkness.

"Stay out of the light!" the order comes.

"Dad?" Emil whispers. Still no fear in his voice.

That they haven't shot from the darkness is promising. I raise the analog over my head, holding it by a finger. "We are surrendering!"

"Dad?" surprise, not worry.

"They want us alive," I whisper, "be ready to take advantage of it."

"Toss your weapon away."

I throw it on the other side of the truck. Emil's lands in the same area.

"Every weapon!"

"We didn't have time to fully arm ourselves," I reply, standing, hands up. Emil moves the wrecking bar before standing and raising his hand.

"That's a kid," someone exclaims and, for once, Emil doesn't correct them.

"Step away from the truck."

I take two steps, moving off the gravel and onto the grass in need of mowing. "We were only defending ourselves," I yell to cover the sound of Emil dragging his foot and the bar onto the grass.

"You interfered in a justified captured of wanted criminals."

Emil's whispered 'bullshit' is filled with emphasis.

Portable lights come on, revealing a dozen soldiers before me and five on the other side. There might be some who stayed with the vehicles. One for each of the three jeeps blocking the road as well as the three who were pursuing us, that is six potential addition to this fight and, at some point, they will decide that whatever instructions they have to take us in alive is not longer worth the death toll.

Three approach me. Two approach Emil, who is now trembling.

This time, his, "Dad?" is filled with so much fear one of the soldier looks at his partner.

"It's okay, Son," I reply, my voice steady. "I'm certain this can be resolved."

“On your knees,” one of the soldier orders me. “Hands behind your head.”

“Don’t worry, kid,” another tells Emil. “I’ll make sure nothing happens to you. Just put your hands in front so I can cuff them, then I’ll take you away from here.”

I breathe and focus on keeping the box containing my possessiveness closed. No one will take Emil from me.

When the hand closes on my wrist, I pivot on a knee, pulling the soldier before me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the wrecking bar raise in the air, Emil’s hand close on it, then he’s fully behind me. I take the gun from the soldier’s holster, flick the safety off and fire at those away. Each of my shots hits one of them, but only three go down. It’s doubtful they are dead. I shoot one of the two others close in the head and a third throws himself to the side and lands in front of the truck. He’d fully out of view before I can aim.

The impact of the bar and breaking of bones causes me to glance at Emil as he ducts under the soldier’s grab. When he stands, the hook side of the bar is behind the soldier’s foot, then the soldier falls back as Emil pulls.

Instead of firing, those still standing rush me. I fire in the back of the soldier I’m holding’s head, then twice at the incoming soldiers before the magazine is empty. I set aside the question of why they still aren’t resorting to shooting and throw my dead shield at the closest soldier.

Then I engage them in hand to hand long enough to take a knife from one. I cut two necks before one has his own knife out. The two soldiers dealing with Emil are loud in their cursing, following strikes and bone breaking.

My opponent over extends, and I open his wrist. Then I have his gun and empty the magazine in the back of a running soldier. I change magazine and turn. “Emil, down.”

He drops, the hook around the neck of his remaining opponent pulling him down at the same time. Before the man can get over the surprise, Emil spins the bar in his hands and brings the flat side down through the man’s spine, just below the neck.

In the distance, headlights are approaching as I scan our surroundings. The body count is three short of how many soldiers we started with. That no more joined means they were all here.

The headlights are closer than I’d expect from a vehicle, respecting the speed limit. “Emil, come to me.” I step back, attentive for motion. Three missing soldiers and no idea when they went missing. Emil is next to me, bar in one hand, gun in the other, also scanning.

I can make out the squareness of the vehicle now in the reflected light.

“That’s far enough.” The man enters the light, gun already pointed at us.

I continue moving back, forcing him to turn to keep watching me.

“I said that’s enough,” he says. “After this carnage, I get why someone wants you alive, but if you push me, I’m going to shoot the kid and tell them he got caught in the crossfire you initiated. And don’t test me,” he adds as I aim the gun at his head. “He’s dead before you’re done pulling the trigger.”

“And you’re going to be dead before the bullet reaches me,” Emil replies, full of defiance.

“Yeah? Well, I think you being dead is going to bother him a whole lot more than me being dead will bother me.”

“How much will you being dead and both of us alive bother you?” I ask as the RV turns to miss the jeeps blocking the road.

“That’s not—” He turns at the sound of the wheels on gravel, and fires at the incoming RV all the way until it hits him. The expression on Alex’s face as the windshield cracked has me worried.

The RV comes to a barely controlled stop, then Alex exits it, gun in hand. He marches to the broken man.

“Be with you in a moment,” he tells me as I open my mouth.

He kicks the man in the sides. “How dare you pull a gun on my family!” He kicks him again. “How fucking dare you being dead right now!” another one. “Do you have any idea the ways I want to hurt you?” He shoots him in the head. “Asshole.”

He holsters the gun and beams at me. “Hey, having fun, I see.”

“That wasn’t smart,” I reply, barely keeping the boxes from exploding. “You didn’t even duck as he fired at the windshield.”

“And chance not see him try to jump out of the way? You’re kidding, right?” the rest is prevented by Emil hugging him.

Ralf, shooting a downed soldier in the head, keeps me from chastising him properly. Ryan stalking in our direction had me pull the two of them behind me. I keep all the boxes under control. I can’t afford any distractions right now.

“You,” the man snarls at Emil. “Are going to explain yourself once this is over.”

“It pretty much is over.” Alex’s reply is punctuated by another gunshot, and I can see the effort it takes Ryan not to react to it. “You and Ralf just have to get in one of those jeeps and drive far and fast and not draw attention to yourselves.”

The snort is a mix of amusement and annoyance. “In your dream, hot stuff.” His expression turns serious again. “We can run. Not until the command center has been neutralized.”

“Why?” I ask. His certainty doesn’t match what I’ve experienced.

“Because right now, they are plugged in into everything. If there’s even one device with a camera on it, they are in it.”

Alex smirks. “I would love to see them get into our phones.”

“They don’t need your phones when there are millions of other phones out there. Not to mention store cameras, nanny cams, laptop cams. You name it. If it catches even one image of your RV, you, us, or whatever vehicle we take here, they will be back on our trail.”

“Which means this will never be over,” I growl. “They’ll have sent the information to a central location and—”

“That’s not how they work.”

“The military has clear communication—”

“This isn’t the military.”

I look at the dead soldiers. The uniforms are perfect. Asyr said the military was on their way.

“They were just the tool the people behind it used,” Ryan said.

“Who are the people being this?” I ask.

“I don’t know, not really. But it’s not the first time we’ve had to deal with their attempts to take us.”

The shift is too sudden. While I see none of the tells from someone lying, he went from certainly a ‘the people behind this’ to uncertainty as to who they are. But now isn’t the time to press him. Not if this isn’t done yet.

“Give me details.”

“The command center is where all the data is held,” he said as Ralf joins us, standing to Emil’s right. Ryan notices and seems to lose his chain of thoughts. “Nothing goes beyond the people they have inserted among whoever they are using to get the job done.”

“How do we tell them apart?”

“They are masters at what they do,” Ralf says.

“You’ll know them if you run into one of them, trust me. Everything the command center holds will only be transferred to the central data holding once it returns to its base of operation. And I don’t know where that is. The transfer happens through hard line to prevent any leakage.”

“For someone who doesn’t know who they are,” Alex says, “you sure know a lot about how they operate.”

“Know your enemy,” Ralf says.

“Like I said, this isn’t our first encounter with them.”

“Alright,” I say before Alex can comment. “Then how do we find that command center?”

“It depends on two things. One, was there anyone among these people who was a master?”

Emil snorts, but I look at the broken body. None of his threats were bluffs. The certainly behind them wasn’t borne of delusion, but of experience.

Ryan notices where I’m looking. “The second part depends entirely on if they went with the smart way and it’s low tech, or if they were dumb and went high tech.”